

TECHNOLOGY MEETS ABSURDITY

BY NADINE WASSERMAN

FERNANDO ORELLANA: RECENT WORK

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LET'S FACE IT, *POOP BOMB* IS FUNNY. But once you get past the painting's title and its cartoony presentation, you become aware of something profoundly sobering. The damage caused by such a device is no laughing matter.

Fernando Orellana's paintings convey an absurdist vision of violence. His imagery owes something to Peter Saul and to the Chicago Imagists. Presented in garish planes of color, Orellana's homemade weapons, vehicles, and severed limbs attest to a culture headed toward destruction. *Poop Bomb* perfectly exemplifies his indictment. The improvised explosive device (IED) depicted is made out of a Nike shoe-box attached with tape to explosives and a cell phone. The image reminds us that our exploitative, industrialized, capitalist economy is, ultimately, not sustainable. Each of Orellana's IED paintings incorporate a cell phone, indicating that the line between accessory and

weapon is indeed very thin. In the catalogue to the exhibition, Orellana explains that the cell phone has become a fixture of contemporary life but "the ease with which the world's military industrial complex can be paralyzed by this technology and other household products is terrifying. Inversely, the absurdity of the information we pass through this precious resource is hilarious."

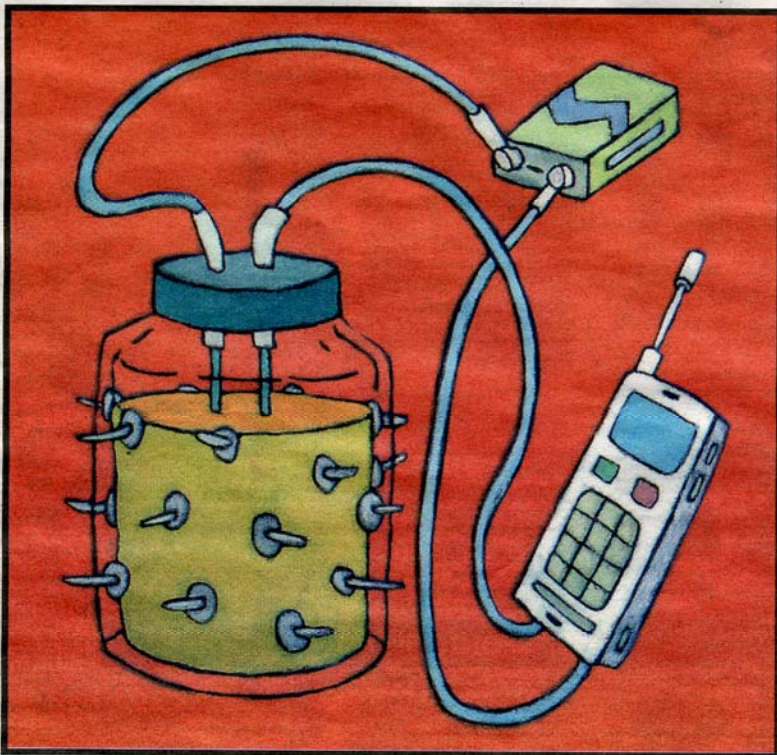
Orellana is a new-media artist, and many of his works incorporate technology as a means to explore its limitations as well as its potential. His sculpture *518-467-DUCK* needs a cell phone to activate. (Alas, if you are one of the 18 percent of Americans who does not own a cell phone yet, you need to get one already, because someone is trying to call you at this very moment!) Once you make the call you set off a string of communications between computers, satellites, control towers, and microprocessors that ultimately loops the signal back to where you are standing so that a padded metal stick can kick the wooden "duck" in the butt. The effect is both funny and anticlimactic.

Orellana continues his inquiry of technological interfaces with *Phoney*, an interactive piece that reminds us of the many artificial interfaces we use for communication. The piece requires two people to activate. As one

talks into an old-school telephone receiver (like those on a public phone), his or her image is broadcast to the other while a toy penguin dances jauntily below the screen, mimicking the absurdity of our disembodied communications.

Another technological symbol Orellana focuses on in this exhibition is the automobile. Orellana's paintings such as *Green Van*, *Go Cars*, and *Yellow Family Van* appear innocent enough until it registers that automobile dependence comes at an immense cost to the environment and that oil dependence has led us into war. His sculpture *Extruder* is a machine that makes miniature cars out of Play-Doh. Every few minutes, a new multicolored car is cut off and drops onto a heap of other rubbery little cars. It is a sober reminder that not only are we car dependent, but in emerging economies like China, 1,000 new cars are sold each day.

The exhibition, overall, gives a comprehensive look at Orellana's recent work, but I would have liked to see more of his technology-based pieces. His *Carry On* was less compelling than an installation he did in the elevator at the Tang Museum. In that installation, called *Elevator's Music*, four robot "heads" equipped with speakers and sensors dropped from the ceiling to take a look around and attempt to communicate with the audience and with each other. While *Carry On* is about surveillance, *Elevator's Music* was much more soulful and thought-provoking in terms of what it means to be a sentient being and what it means to be inanimate. A similarly complex piece is *Sleep Waking*, currently up at Exit Art. In this piece, a small robot reenacts Orellana's brainwave activity during R.E.M. sleep. In essence, the robot embodies Orellana's dreams. R.E.M. is a fairly recent scientific discovery, and sleep is an infinitely complex function. While Orellana provides the thoughts and the robot provides the actions, there is a disconnect between what each one "knows." Presumably, Orellana does not recall what occurred in his dreams, and the robot ultimately does not control its own movements. As if to underscore this point, while I was watching it, the robot, after performing a complex move, tipped over and could not right itself. It perfectly demonstrated the irony of trying to create "artificial" intelligence when there is still so much to know about the real thing. ■



Yes, it's a bomb: Orellana's *Nail Jar*.